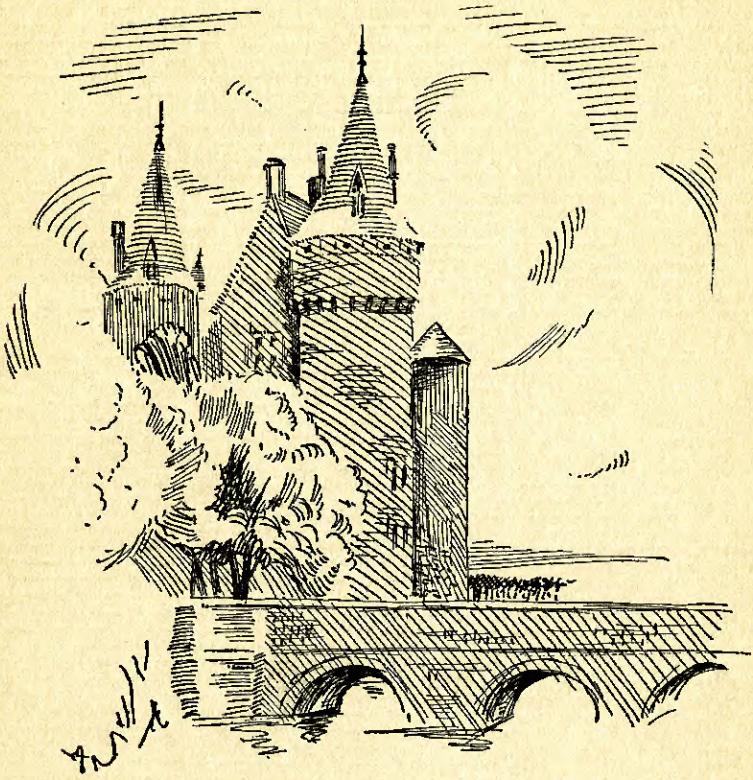

The FRENCH SCHOOL at Middlebury

by DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

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The French School of Middlebury College

I am very glad of the privilege of reprinting with Mrs. Fisher's permission her enthusiastic description of the French School at Middlebury.

The group of two hundred students enrolled in the summer of 1923 came from twenty-seven different states and represented seventy-eight American colleges and universities. Seventy-three percent of those enrolled held baccalaureate degrees. At the close of the session the degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon five.

In addition to the Middlebury School a section of the French School was organized in 1923 for study and travel in France with headquarters in Paris. Forty students enrolled in this school.

Information about either the Paris or Middlebury sessions may be procured by anyone interested.

EDWARD D. COLLINS, Director,
Summer Session.

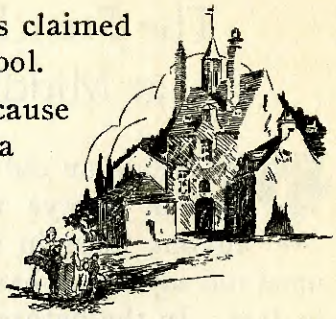
Middlebury, Vt.
October 15, 1923.

The French School at Middlebury

THERE is an old saying that a convert is always more fervent than anyone born in the faith, and like most old sayings it has a very sound basis in fact. In the nature of things the convert appreciates the advantages of the faith more because he knows for himself some of the disadvantages in other conditions. I am a living proof of this basic truth, because in the matter of the French School at Middlebury, I am a convert.

I am not a graduate of Middlebury; no member of my family ever had the slightest connection with it or affection for it; up to a few years ago I had only the vaguest notions of the work done there and that only because I happened to live in Vermont. When I began to hear rumors about especially good work done in the French School I was openly sceptical. In the first place, judging from the usual American standards of bigness and expensiveness, it seemed highly unlikely that a small old college in the small, poor state of Vermont would have any department whose work was as far above the Amer-

ican average as was claimed for the French School.



Furthermore because I happen to know a good deal and to care a vast deal about the teaching of French in the United States, I knew, simply *knew* that such results as were cited from the Middlebury French School were impossible. I had seen so many French departments in American institutions of learning from high schools to universities, run head on into the stone-wall physical impossibility of teaching spoken French to American students so that it would be a truly living language to them. I had seen too many fine professors of French struggle desperately to convey spoken French into the brains of American boys and girls and give up the fight, submerged under the mass of great numbers, the inaptitude for languages of the Anglo-Saxon mind and tongue, and the deep-rooted conviction in the majority of American students that French is not really a serious study like trigonometry or chemistry, and that there is no sense in exerting yourself to obtain more than a reading knowledge of it . . . lucky if this amounts

to a little more than the average, halting dictionary-consulting notions of Latin.

HADN'T I met all over France, Americans who were university graduates, who could scarcely order a meal in a French restaurant and who could not understand what a French ticket seller said to them in a railway station?

How likely was it that a little fresh-water college in a small Vermont town could get any better results?

There's the photograph of me, unconverted, before I made my first visit to Middlebury. Nobody could have gone there with a greater prejudice against the French School.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I don't know much more about how they do it in Middlebury than before, except that I imagine that they use not only all the finest modern discoveries in phonetics and methods, but also the same sort of flaming, high-powered enthusia which accomplishes all the great things in this world. I do not know exactly how they do it; but I no longer have the slightest doubt that the trick is really turned.

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THESE typical young Yankees, without any more natural inclination for acquiring another language than any other country-bred New England boys and girls, actually do learn to speak French fluently, admirably, easily, and to understand French without a trace of nervous tension of uncertainty . . . let alone a complete grasp on written French about as complete as their knowledge of written English. They actually do experience the civilizing, broadening, ripening, maturing benefits which theoretically have always come from the mastery of another living language. It seems incredible but it is really true.

The light of French culture shines up there in those Vermont hills with its own true, clear steadiness, not with the murky struggling gleam which is all that is known by so many American students of French. Every one of those American boys and girls goes out from his French courses an unconscious (and hence most efficacious) missionary for true international understanding and co-operation. Every one of them has had his native provincial horizon lifted and widened and heightened by his genuine understanding and mastery of a language, which, together with his own, has been the greatest

instrument of the modern world in advancing our intellectual life and the best of our civilization.

BUT in addition to the influence on these plastic young American intelligences in their formative age, the French School is doing a marvelous work of equal importance among teachers of French. Every summer, teachers of French from all over this country assemble there and charge their individual batteries at the whirring dynamo of Professor de Visme's personality and that of the teachers whom he gathers about him. They go back to their work, scattered torch-carriers, inspired in the literal sense of the word, as people very seldom are inspired, by a new realization of the worth and value and importance of the work to which they have set themselves, and most vital of all, by a new, burning conviction that *the work can be done.*

The value of such a school in America is incalculable. And oddly enough a considerable part of its success comes, in my judgment from its being situated just where it is, in a small institution, with a manageable

number of students, where the teachers are freed from the crushing weight of numbers, where the priceless, u n i q u e quality of a rare personality like that of P r o f e s s o r de Visme's is not smothered by an overwhelmingly various and complicated background.

But of course, things being what they are (in America at least) and things physically big always getting more money and recognition and prestige than things physically small no matter how excellent, it is becoming harder and harder for a small college like Middlebury to manage the financing of this rare school. With the rush of summer students, with public attention more and more fixed on the French School, with other institutions of infinitely greater resources casting covetous eyes on the whole affair, Middlebury finds itself somewhat in the position of a comfortable small town family who discover a Titian in their attic. They would like to keep it where everybody could enjoy it free, and not sell it to a collector, but they find all

their scale of expenses changed because of the new possession, and the visitors and attention it attracts.

Personally I can't imagine any better way of helping along good relations between France and America, than in helping Middlebury College keep intact the remarkable treasure it has in its French School.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher